

Community Cop

On one of the toughest beats in town, a cop lays down his gun and takes up a new style of policing



Synopsis

On one of the toughest beats in town, a cop lays down his gun and takes on a new style of policing. *Community Cop* follows Constable Andrew 'AJ' Allen working with the young African refugee community in the Flemington high-rise estate in inner city Melbourne.

The estate is home to 4000 people, many of them from war-torn Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is a diverse, volatile and complex neighbourhood with a history of high crime, tough policing, and escalating clashes between the police and young people who often see police as the enemy.

With limited resources but assistance from key community members including youth worker Ahmed Ahmed and youth 'troublemaker' turned advocate Ahmed Dini, AJ sets out to earn the trust of this suspicious community. It is a tough job, when some even within his own ranks regard this community policing as a waste of time and money.

Curriculum links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies, History and SOSE/HSIE, Drama Studies, Legal Studies, Civics, Politics.

Background and overview

Flemington is an inner suburb immediately to the northwest of central Melbourne. The Flemington public housing estate, where much of the program is filmed, has existed since the 1960s. It caters for a range of people in need, including refugee communities from war-torn regions of the world, such as the Horn of Africa.

- Draw a map of the Horn of Africa, indicating the countries of Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia and Djibouti. Carry out research on the numbers of people from the Horn of Africa who have arrived and settled in Australia as refugees, and include this information with the map. You may wish to present these details in statistical form, as a graph, showing the rise and fall in yearly population intake numbers, from the 1990s onwards. Include details on the principal regions, cities or towns in Australia where refugees from the Horn have first settled on arrival. Ensure you give the map a title to match the content. (For more on African refugees in Australia, particularly from Sudan, which is to the west of the Horn region, see film references to *I'll Call Australia Home*. Teachers' notes are available for this program, from the Screen Australia website. For some immigration statistics see 'African Australian resources' in website references.)
- Carry out appropriate research then on poster paper draw a map of the general area of Flemington and North Melbourne where most of *Community Cop* is filmed. Indicate on the map the location of the public housing estates of both suburbs, and of the Flemington police station. Add drawings or photographs of these places to your poster.
- Following from the previous activity, carry out research then write a short report on Flemington's population mix of Australian-born and overseas-born residents. Where do most overseas-born residents come from? How does this information generally compare to the Australian average population distribution, and are there any reasons to explain these figures? You may wish to present this report as a graphical display of statistics. (For more information, see 'Flemington and Kensington Community' in website references. On the home page is a link titled 'About Flemington' where you will find official census details.)
- Discuss in class your impression of the general locale of Flemington as presented during the program. Do you think this view of Flemington is realistic, fair, adequate? If you were a resident of the area (as you may well be), would you be satisfied with the image presented? How does this image compare with the image presented, for example, on the Flemington and Kensington Community website, referred to in the previous activity, and also on the Moonee Valley City Council website? Does the general presentation on these sites contradict, confirm, enhance or extend your understanding and appreciation of what you have seen in the program? (More questions on the way the program depicts the Flemington *milieu* may be found in the Media Studies section.)

The main 'players'

Carry out the following activities relating to the central participants of *Community Cop*.

- Discuss in class then write your own commentary on the personal background histories (where applicable), and the 'roles' and functions each of the following participants plays during the program, showing how they interconnect and relate to each other, their importance to the issues and events depicted, the problems they encounter, how they attempt to resolve those problems, and whether they are achieving a measure of success in their endeavours:
 - Constable Andrew ('AJ') Allen
 - Ahmed Ahmed
 - Ahmed Dini
 - District Inspector Nigel Howard
 - Constable Glenn Birt
- Consider your response to the question: What is a 'typical' police officer? Write a commentary on whether you would regard AJ as a typical police officer. Why is it that young Africans on the housing estate trust him, and are prepared to talk to him, when they might be more wary of other police officers? How do you think he gains that trust? Why does he refer to himself as a 'middle man'? What do you think AJ means, near the end of the program, when he says, 'You're trying to sell what you're doing to not just the community, but...to your peers and to the greater Victoria Police...It shouldn't really be my job to have to go round and sell it, it should sell itself'. Why does he sound frustrated?
- Ahmed Dini is referred to during the program as having 'often being on the wrong side of the law'. He even says that he was 'seen as a thug leader'. Discuss whether you think that with his personal history he is now adequately suited, in the words of the voice-over narration, to being an 'advocate for the rights of young African men'. What does being an 'advocate' mean, and what are the responsibilities of taking on this position? In considering his past and present activities and attitudes, what are the benefits and the obstacles or even the dangers for himself, the police and the local African community?
- During the program it is reported in the news media that Ahmed Ahmed has branded the Flemington police as 'corrupt' and 'racist'. From what you have seen in the program, and from your own thoughts on these types of accusations, what are the reactions and effects, both short-term and long-term, that might arise? What does he mean later when suggesting that from 'a little bit of bad...a greater good comes out of it'?
- At the end of the program Ahmed Dini is seen attempting to coach an Australian Rules football team during a match. Discuss in class the wider significance of this moment beyond its being merely a sports event, and its importance to the overall themes and purposes of *Community Cop*. In what ways might it be relevant and even symbolic, in a broader sense than his football coaching role, when he says, in the closing lines of dialogue, 'I'm a wiser man'?
- Imagine that it is now twelve months after the events depicted in the program. You are Glenn Birt, now working and living elsewhere. Write an email in 200-300 words to your successor, AJ, and write a reply of about the same length. Consider carefully what they might say to each other about their positions as 'community cops', what questions they might ask, what they think and feel about the work they have done, and what the future holds.
- Following on from the previous activities, plan, draft, edit and complete a short fiction story either about a day in the life of a 'community cop' such as AJ, or an 'advocate' such as Ahmed Dini, or a youth worker such as Ahmed Ahmed. Consider plot and dramatic development and appeal, the range of characters, character relationships and motives for behaviour, point of view and narrative style.

African community and local amenities

Questions are raised during the program about the causal links that can be drawn between the wellbeing and behaviour of young members of the African community residing on the Flemington high-rise estate, and the availability of local amenities and facilities they might have access to on a regular basis.

- In referring to a very small minority of local African youths that ‘continually get in trouble’, AJ makes the point that, ‘...the majority of kids down there [on the estate] are just normal kids just trying to get along’. Discuss in class what he means by ‘just trying to get along’. From your viewing of the program, what is preventing them, or hindering them, over which they have little control, from ‘getting along’ in a positive, productive, optimistic way? For example, what are the situations young people in the estate encounter with being able to meet and socialise in groups? How does the environment and geographical layout of the estate itself affect the ability of young people to congregate? What kinds of facilities are there around the estate for sports activities such as soccer, basketball etc? What is the staffing situation involving local community centres? What, in general, is the cause of the boredom that results in youths getting into trouble with the law?
- Glenn Birt says that amenities for the local African ‘kids’ are ‘disgraceful’. Discuss in class the reasons suggested by Glenn as to why government funding has not been put into the development of local facilities such as a ‘nice gym...a beautiful lawn and an oval’. Do you think he is correct? Are there alternative reasons? Why aren’t the conditions local estate youths experience on a daily basis very high on the political agenda at local, state and national level? Should they, in fact, be a political issue?
- From the program discuss in class then write your own commentary on the family and cultural expectations, discussed by Ahmed Dini, that young Africans experience that make wider engagement with the general Australian community difficult. For example what is a common situation that local Africans must deal with that actively prevents them from improving their position in life economically, even if they are employed and earning an income?
- We are told that a year before the events depicted in the program take place, there was a police-organised visit to the Kokoda Track in New Guinea. (Visits to Kokoda have become an annual event, organised by the Victoria Police.) From what we see unfolding in the film, discuss the long-term wider purpose and importance of this event beyond merely being a tourist activity. (Also see ‘Flemington estate teenagers and Kokoda Track’ and ‘Victoria Police Media Centre’ in website references.)
- Following from the previous activity, write a set of diary entries from the viewpoint of one of the teenagers who participated in the Kokoda visit, reflecting upon it, on the police officers that also participated in it, whether it has changed the teenager’s outlook on life at home on the housing estate, and whether he or she would recommend the experience to others in the local community.
- Write a comment about the role played by the Melbourne Tigers basketball club in helping to foster improved community relations at and around the estate, and the relevance and importance of the Australian Rules football ‘Unity Cup’, which we see near the end of the program. Discuss whether these kinds of events have a lasting positive value.
- In small groups, discuss then prepare a written report of practical suggestions and recommendations for at least one of local, state and national governments as to how to continue with, improve and advance the welfare and prospects of African youths in the local community and the housing estate environment.
- In pairs or small groups, plan and draft the script for a drama scene, or a sequence of drama scenes, drawing from Ahmed Dini’s comments about the home and cultural issues that young Africans on the estate contend with, in conjunction with the lack of community facilities and amenities. You may invent a range of characters, from members of the estate community, to police officers, social workers, local politicians and news media reporters. Decide on settings, time sequencing, character relationships, themes, conflict situations, plot or story resolutions and effective ways of best concluding your story. Rehearse a play reading, making adjustments to the script as required. Carry out a play reading or a performance to the class. (What is a ‘conflict situation’? See ‘Conflict in fiction’, website references.)
You may wish to plan the script for sound only, and then to rehearse, record and edit a reading for playback on your school’s intranet or for download as a podcast. Consider, for example, how best to use sound: actors’ voices for dialogue and singing, sound effects, incidental on-the-scene music and the use of recorded background music. You may also want to use a voice-over narrator to set the scene and the locations, and move the action forward.

Resources and problem solving

During the program we see both the 'community cops' and members of the African community striving to achieve positive outcomes for local youth, often in the face of a range of obstacles.

- Discuss in class how AJ and Glenn Birt draw upon resources such as organisations, funding and grants, that may be of benefit to young Africans in the local community. What limitations are they labouring under? What does Glenn mean when he says, 'It's all in my head basically', and AJ replies, 'That's a worry'? What kinds of conditions do they experience in their own working environment in the police station and even in their own office space? How do you think those conditions might affect their attitude to their work, and their sense of wellbeing and achievement in what they are expected to do? Do you think that having to spend time in their office 'Googling' the internet is a productive management of resources? How might you, if you had a chance, set out to improve this situation? Consider such options as the worth of creating a database system of recordkeeping. Would this merely be another time-consuming task?
- Glenn says, speaking about the police service of which he is a member, 'I don't think there's a group, an organisation, that hates change as much as us'. Why does he make this comment, and how does it relate to his and AJ's roles as police community liaison officers? Do you think this situation is reinforced and intensified as the program continues, or not? Discuss, drawing on examples from the program.
- In pairs, plan and write a sequence of dialogue that takes place between one or more squad car police officers whose job it is to patrol the local district and to attend crime scenes etc, and a 'community cop' such as AJ or Glenn, whose policing methods may be different. Look carefully at their different attitudes to policing and how they express those attitudes. Is there a conflict of views and feelings between them? Consider the outcome of the scene, and the possible ways it might conclude.
- From the program comment on the role and benefits of formal school and university education as a lifelong resource for young Africans in the local housing estate community. How important is an education, in this context, beyond merely gaining academic qualifications and high marks? Draw on specific examples from the film.
- Later in the program there is a meeting of the African community to discuss the attitudes of the police and the mass media. Discuss in class the public speech made by young woman, Fowsia Ahmed, about the differences in behaviour and attitude between boys and girls towards the police, and the 'smarter way' to deal with these issues of alleged police behaviour. What, in fact, does she mean by finding a 'smarter way'? What is that way, how might it be accomplished, and what might be the outcome?
- Following from the previous activity, plan and write a fiction short story that dramatises the types of issues and situations that Fowsia Ahmed discusses. Consider settings, action, theme, characters, character relationships and conflicts.

Local community and news media

There are many references during the program to the role of the mass media in portraying the activities of the local police and African youths from the Flemington housing estate.

- Drawing from examples in the program, discuss in class and make notes on the way in which the news media (newspapers and television) present and report on the activities of young Africans from the Flemington housing estate. Is it informed, insightful, fair, sympathetic, sensationalist, damaging, inflammatory, biased, prejudiced? Note the newspaper headlines and the wording and graphics used during TV news reports. You may also want to examine the ways in which the news media report on the activities and behaviour of the police. To what extent is this reporting based on hard, substantiated evidence, or unsubstantiated claims, opinions and hearsay?
- Following from the previous activity, in small groups invent a detailed conflict scenario in which police, a group of local, young Africans, and other members of the public are involved. Based on this scenario, each member of the group is to plan and write two news reports of it, of 200-300 words each, looking at the standard journalistic imperatives of What, Where, When, Who and Why. Where does the truth of what happened exist in each news account? One report will be for a large daily metropolitan newspaper

with wide public readership. The second report will be for a local African community newspaper. You may include eyewitness accounts in both stories, although they may not necessarily be from the same people. Consider the ways in which both newspapers will present the same news story, the purposes of each story, and the intended reading audiences. Make sure the news stories have headlines. Where applicable, include photographs and captions. Use desktop publishing software to lay out and format each story into newspaper columns.

- Research, discuss in class then write a commentary on the purposes and intentions of the Victoria Police Media Centre (or the police media centre of any other Australian federal or state jurisdiction) and the types of messages it presents to the public both generally and in specific situations such as the relationship between police and the African community. Is accuracy and truth clouded by public relations, publicity and 'spin'? (See 'Victoria Police Media Centre' in website references.)

Media Studies

Carry out the following activities.

- Discuss in class and write your own commentary on the opening sequence of the program, to the point where the title credits appear on the screen. What is the purpose and the intended effect on the viewing audience of the soundtrack's rap music? Transcribe the lyrics of the song then comment on what they are about, the messages they appear to be broadcasting, and their relationship to the program's overall content. Examine whether the words of the song complement and comment on what we are seeing simultaneously on-screen. Would you consider the song to be political, confrontational? (Note that the rap band featured in the program is based in Flemington and is called Group 120. See website references.)

What impressions of urban life are created by the visuals and sound effects, and the way in which they are edited in sequence? Comment on the pacing of the editing. For example, is it synchronised to the rhythm of the music? Is 'real life' documented and shown unmediated in this opening sequence, or dramatised into a form of story by the filmmakers?

Discuss whether the style, approach and method of the introductory sequence is continued or not in the rest of the film.

- Following from the previous activity, you may wish to work in pairs to plan and compose the lyrics for a rap song based on later sequences of *Community Cop*.
- Comment on whether *Community Cop* presents an entirely objective view of its participants and subject matter. Does it seek to criticise, blame, embarrass, defend, sympathise? Support your views with examples from the program.
- Discuss the intrusiveness of the camera on the subjects participating in the film. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this filmmaking procedure? Does the presence of the camera affect on-screen behaviour?
- It is stated in the program's press kit information that 130 hours of footage were filmed. This has been edited down to 51 minutes. Write a commentary on what might have been left out, and what, if anything, you would have like to have seen included which was missing from the program. Was there anything in the program that could have been omitted? For example, is the scene of AJ in his office attempting to pick up a broken cardboard box relevant to our understanding of the program's intentions and themes?
- Plan and create a display poster to promote *Community Cop* to a teenage audience. Consider the layout of text and image.
- In 350-400 words, review *Community Cop* for a TV guide newspaper liftout.

References and Further Resources

Books

Diane Barnes, *Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Australia: Issues of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Transcultural Mental Health Centre, Parramatta, 2003

Peter Browne, *The Longest Journey: Resettling Refugees from Africa*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2006

Janet BL Chan, *Changing Police Culture: Policing in a Multicultural Society*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997

Chris Cunneen and Rob White, *Juvenile Justice: Youth and Crime in Australia*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2007

Peter Mares, *Borderline: Australia's Response to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Wake of the Tampa*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, second edition, 2002

Seumas Miller, John Blackler and Andrew Alexandra, *Police Ethics*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2006

Margaret Mitchell and John Casey (editors), *Police Leadership and Management*, Federation Press, Annandale, 2007

Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe and Liz Dimock, *African Communities and Settlement Services in Victoria: Towards Better Service Delivery Models*, Australian Multicultural Foundation, Carlton, 2002

School's In for Refugees: Whole-School Guide to Refugee Readiness, Foundation House, Brunswick, 2004, updated 2007

Lawrence T Udo-Ekpo, *The Africans in Australia: Expectations and Shattered Dreams*, Seaview Press West Lakes, 1999

Film/TV

Documentary:

Sarah Barton (director), *A Wing and a Prayer*, SBS Independent, 2000

Belinda Mason (director), *I'll Call Australia Home*, Screen Australia, 2008

Young Africans in Schools, DVD of edited highlights of professional learning workshop, Australian Refugee Association, Underdale, SA, 2005

Tom Zubrycki, *Temple of Dreams*, SBS Independent, 2007

Websites

African Australian resources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Australian

www.africanoz.com.au

www.afsaap.org.au/Conferences/2008/ANU/2008.htm

Conflict in fiction:

www.fictionfactor.com/articles/conflict.html

www.write4kids.com/feature.html

Flemington and Kensington Community:

<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~flemweb>

Flemington estate teenagers and Kokoda Track:

www.theage.com.au/national/kokoda-experience-trailblazer-for-teen-and-police-bonds-20080808-3sf1.html

www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=15786

Flemington police announce knife amnesty:

www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=10707

Group 120:

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=235903030>

Horn of Africa:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horn_of_Africa

Jesuit Social Services Horn of Africa program:

<http://old.jss.org.au/programmes/HOA.html>

<http://old.jss.org.au/research/documents/Developingpartnershipsbetweenethniccommunitiesandcommunityserviceagenciesfinal.pdf>

Moonee Valley City Council:

www.mvcc.vic.gov.au

'Racist police' at Flemington:

www.theage.com.au/news/national/police-accused-of-race-attacks-on-africans/2007/09/29/1190486635545.html

www.greenleft.org.au/2007/734/38040

Victoria Police Media Centre (search the site for references to Flemington, Kokoda, AJ etc):

www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=4

Community Cop

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Producer: Sally Ingleton

Writer/Director: Helen Gaynor

Executive Producer: Anna Grieve

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